

NETWORKING KNOW-HOW

Making the most of industry events



Russ Adsit, FASLA

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How often do you hear that you have to “network” to find a job, advance your career, make sales or generally get ahead in this market? Yes, I thought so. But what is networking? Is it just showing up? Afraid not.

Effective networking is not about how many business cards you can collect from an event. To properly apply the term, it means some actual work ahead of as well as following an event. Before you go, you need to do some assessments—self-assessment, business assessment and an overall goal of what you expect to be able to give to the event. Good networking is about giving, as this is how you build trust and provide a memorable moment to those you are seeking to follow up with in the months or years to come.

Research shows that the most effective networking events are those of professional organizations, volunteer work and charities/fund-raisers; they are nonthreatening events to the attendees, do not have a sales purpose and attract decision makers from many levels. But, networking can go on at the grocery store, on an airplane, at the fitness club or in a restaurant. One tool for the beginner at an event is to ask for advice. Most people are flattered when asked for advice and once given, the advisor becomes vested in knowing the outcome of that advice, presenting a chance to follow up.

Be prepared with your “elevator speech.” This is your one- or two-minute response when someone asks you what you do or what you are looking for. The speech needs to be practiced enough to become natural and appear unrehearsed. It needs to be in your own words and not include jargon or unusual words. You need to have passion for what you do and allow what you say to express that passion. Have different versions of the speech for differing situations. Be able to cut it short if the elevator comes to an early stop or the listener stops listening. Rather than answering the question with a stereotype such as “I’m an engineer,” answer with a solution to a common problem or an action that will interest the listener and be memorable. You may answer that you “show contractors how to keep soil in its place and clients from being fined.” You want an engaging message, not one that permits the listener to simply acknowledge your answer and move on.

Be prepared to engage in conversation. Most of us listen for “keywords” and then wait for a chance to respond. Learn how to listen to what is being said and respond appropriately. For instance, if someone is relating an experience about a tornado, listen for the message about how this affected them and respond to that message rather than relating a story about your last experience with a tornado. If you do not understand how to listen, find a book and learn. Idle chat is common, listening is memorable.

Think about the people you know who may have a business need or be able to offer something to others you will meet. If these people will be in attendance, be ready to introduce them. Prior to embarking on any network event, your self-assessment should include a list of the 30 most influential people you know who would return your phone call if you left your name and phone number. Why would they do this? If you know why, you will begin to know how to approach people you wish would return your call. This works for sales calls as well as a job hunt.

Networking is the best way to land that new job or position, as well. Most jobs—especially the most rewarding jobs—are not advertised in the mass market. “Hidden” jobs or jobs created for the talented individual are the best-paid and most satisfying jobs. The only way to find out about these is to get out there and mingle, talk, network, share and ask questions. **[SWS]**

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